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CHAPTER VII

PROPERTY, WEALTH, AND THE FAMILY

596 THE WORD "family" as employed in Haiti can be understood only in terms of a broader meaning than is given it in Europe and America, where it describes only the most immediate relationship group. Though in Haiti this type of organization, consisting of mother, father, and children, lies at the base of its social structure, the Haitian "family" includes a wide range of relatives, direct and collateral, on the sides of both parents. The immediate family is thus but a part of a larger group, to which it is in many instances subordinate.

611 198 197 It becomes apparent, from even so brief a statement, that Haitian society has not retained that exclusive emphasis on descent in the maternal or the paternal line that characterizes most of the civilizations of Africa. And while a more detailed discussion of the manner in which African and European traditions are combined in Haitian culture must be reserved for later pages, this much may at the moment be made clear: The Africans who peopled Haiti, coming from cultures where descent is counted solely on the side of the mother or the father, and coming into contact with the French, whose custom binds children with equal strength to the families of both parents, molded both traditions into the social forms found

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today not only in Mirebalais, but, in their essential outlines, throughout the Republic.

The larger relationship grouping originates in the immediate family, and the formation of new extended families is a continuing arc. Characteristically, the process begins when a man leaves the habitation of his father and, with his wife, settles on land somewhat remote from the dwellings of either his people or those of his wife. As the sons of this couple grow up and marry, they make their homes near that of their father, so that in time a group of immediate families related in the paternal line clusters about the dwelling of this original settler, forming a habitation. The continuation of the process depends upon the amount of land available to the group; in any event, given enough time, land to permit all the male descendants of the founder to support themselves and their families will be lacking, so that the younger men will repeat the process that has been described, and themselves become the founders of new habitations whose members, with the passing of generations, will eventually be lost to the original group. While land is available, a young man is given several hectares by his father when he marries, and here he establishes his household. If the family have prospered, additional land is bought as more young men grow up, so that the relationship group may become a community of considerable size.

In accordance with this rule of residence, only rarely will a man settle on the property of his wife's parents, since to do so reflects unfavorably on his personal status. When this does occur, it is probably because of a serious quarrel with his own people. In such a case, if his marriage endures, he becomes a quasi-member of his wife's family, but unless he has committed some extremely grave offense, such as publicly insulting or striking a parent or grandparent, he does not forfeit membership in his own group.[4] Similarly, the fact of his having settled away from the habitation of his family does not disinherit him, for, as will be seen, this occurs in but the

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case certain aspects of the historical development of Haiti have doubtless tended to reinforce African custom. Reference has been made to the fact that the great proportion of traders are women, a truism in Africa as in Haiti, where by general rule men are the producers and women the distributors of goods. In Haiti, however, the fact that for many decades men were likely to be arbitrarily impressed into military service by local chieftains when they came to town — particularly in Mirebalais, which had always been one of the centers of Caco activity — discouraged them from attending the markets. Thus African usage has here been reinforced by the historical fact of Haitian political instability. The fact that the proceeds from trading belong to the woman who does the trading, and that in consequence women are encountered who, though married, command independent means and exercise full control over their resources, is a carry-over of African tradition and, as in Africa, this gives to women a position in the economic world quite foreign to conventional European practice.

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The form of the family as found in Mirebalais demonstrates that the African social grouping which comprises all those descended on one side of the family has largely disappeared there, though it is possible that at least the vestiges of it may have survived in other regions of Haiti. Yet in West Africa, though descent is legally counted on but one side of the family, psychological adherence to the families of both parents is everywhere important. Therefore it is logical to assume that the concept, reinforced by the pattern of dual descent and double familial affiliation of the French, has been retained in Haiti to the neglect of the aboriginal larger groupings, where, as has been seen, not only is relationship counted on both sides of the family, but, more significantly, the right to reprimand and punish is held and exerted by elders in both the maternal and the paternal lines. On the other hand, it is apparent that the feeling for larger relationship groups has not been entirely lost, particularly in the paternal line, when

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such matters as the passing on of the *loa* in families, the duties toward family dead, and the possible inheritance of food taboos are recalled. Like all these survivals, that of food taboos is not as clear in its expression in Haiti as in its aboriginal setting. Its determination is largely by trial and error, so that a mother, before the birth of her child, not only abstains from eating the foods harmful to her, but later carefully tries these on the child to ascertain their effect. Yet the custom, at best, is a tenuous one. Sometimes, if food uncongenial to a parent has ill effects on a person, "he goes on eating it until he becomes accustomed to it"—though this statement brought forth an emphatic dissent from another Haitian: "Not I! If a food harms me once, I am through with it."

Africanisms are particularly marked in the organization of and attitudes toward the ancestral cult. Today the fear of the power of the dead is as living in Haiti as in West Africa, despite the influence of the Catholic Church in changing concepts of the heavenly world of the dead and the role of ghosts on earth. It is quite true that the outer forms of ceremonialism taken by ancestor-worship in West Africa have disappeared; but when the meticulousness with which the rites of death are carried out, and the institution of *mangé morts* are remembered, it is seen that the spirit of African ritual observances has by no means been lost. African elements have survived even in the services for the dead, now largely taken over by the Church. On the anniversary of death a special commemorative mass is sung in the church, which the family of the dead attend in a body. Before they leave the habitation for the mass, however, animals are killed to provide meat for the feast which follows the Church service, and for the *mangé morts*, which also takes place at the same time. Immediately after the mass a reception takes place at the house of some member of the family who lives in town, or at the home of a friend, where cakes and liquors are served. At about noon, however, family and friends proceed to the habitation, where